

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE  
AT KNOXVILLE

DONALD L. CURETON, )  
Petitioner, )  
v. ) Nos. 3:03-CR-116-TWP-HBG-1  
3:16-CV-298-TWP  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, )  
Respondent. )

**MEMORANDUM OPINION**

Presently before the Court is an amended motion to vacate, set aside, or correct sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 filed by Donald L. Cureton (“petitioner”) which challenges his enhanced sentence as an armed career criminal under the Armed Career Criminal Act (“ACCA”), 18 U.S.C. § 924(e), pursuant to *Johnson v. United States*, 135 S. Ct. 2551 (2015).<sup>1</sup> In light of both *Johnson* and the recent *en banc* decision of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in *United States v. Stitt*, 860 F.3d 854 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2017), it now is undisputed that petitioner no longer qualifies as an armed career criminal under the ACCA. Accordingly, petitioner’s amended § 2255 motion [Doc. 55] will be **GRANTED**.<sup>2</sup>

**I. BACKGROUND**

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<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Court has determined that *Johnson*, which invalidated the residual clause of the ACCA as unconstitutionally vague, announced a new “substantive rule that has retroactive effect in cases on collateral review.” *Welch v. United States*, 136 S. Ct. 1257, 1268 (2016); *see also In Re Watkins*, 810 F.3d 375, 381-85 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Petitioner’s initial motion to vacate, set aside, or correct sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 [Doc. 54] was superseded by the amended motion filed the same day and will be denied as moot.

On January 6, 2004, a grand jury sitting in the Eastern District of Tennessee returned a four-count superseding indictment against petitioner and a co-defendant. Petitioner was charged at Count One with possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g)(1) and 924(e); at Count Two with aiding and abetting the possession of equipment, chemicals, products and materials used to manufacture methamphetamine, in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 843(a)(6) and 18 U.S.C. § 2; at Count Three with failure to appear before the court as required, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 3146(a)(1) and (b)(1)(A)(i); and, at Count Four with resisting a lawful court order, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 401(3) and 3147 [Doc. 23]. On May 18, 2004, petitioner entered a plea of guilty as to Counts One and Four of the superseding indictment [Doc. 27].

The presentence investigation report (“PSIR”) identified three previous convictions for a violent felony, committed on occasions different from one another, that qualified petitioner as an armed career criminal under the ACCA. All three of those convictions were for aggravated burglary [PSIR ¶¶ 76, 77, 78].<sup>3</sup> As an armed career criminal, petitioner was subject to a statutory mandatory minimum sentence of 15 years to a maximum of life at Count One and his advisory guideline sentencing range was 180 to 210 months [PSIR ¶¶ 104, 105].

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<sup>3</sup> Petitioner was convicted and sentenced for all three aggravated burglary offenses on June 2, 1992, in the Blount County, Tennessee, Criminal Court [PSIR ¶¶ 76, 77, 78]. The ACCA requires three previous convictions committed “on occasions different from one another.” 18 U.S.C. § 924(e)(1). The Sixth Circuit has held that “under the ACCA, a career criminal is one who has been convicted of three criminal ‘episodes.’” *United States v. Hockenberry*, 730 F.3d 645, 667 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2013) (quoting *United States v. McCauley*, 548 F.3d 440, 448 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2008)). “Although related to the entire course of events, an episode is a punctuated occurrence with a limited duration.” *McCauley*, 548 F.3d at 448. Accordingly, crimes that a defendant commits against different victims, in different places, and at different times, will generally be separate offenses. *Hockenberry*, 730 F.3d at 667. Thus, “even when convictions ‘were sentenced on the same day, they count separately for purposes of calculating an ACCA enhancement.’” *Id.* (quoting *United States v. Kearney*, 675 F.3d 571, 575 n. 5 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2012)).

On March 30, 2005, petitioner was sentenced to a term of imprisonment of 180 months as to Count One of the superseding indictment and 120 months as to Count Four, to be served concurrently, to be followed by a term of supervised release of five years on Count One and three years on Count Four, to be served concurrently. [Doc. 40]. On April 27, 2006, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed petitioner's classification and sentence as an armed career criminal [Doc. 49]. Petitioner's application for a writ of certiorari was denied by the United States Supreme Court on October 16, 2006 [Doc. 52].

On June 6, 2016, petitioner, through court-appointed counsel, filed an amended § 2255 motion challenging his armed career criminal status based on the Supreme Court's invalidation of the ACCA residual clause in *Johnson* [Doc. 55]. The government's request to defer ruling on petitioner's motion pending an *en banc* decision from the Sixth Circuit in *United States v. Stitt*, 646 Fed. App'x 454 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2016), was granted by the Court on October 19, 2016 [Doc. 62]. On June 27, 2017, the Sixth Circuit issued its *en banc* decision holding that a conviction of aggravated burglary under Tennessee law does not qualify as a violent felony predicate offense under the ACCA. *United States v. Stitt*, 860 F.3d at 856.

On July 27, 2017, the parties filed a joint status report agreeing that petitioner no longer qualifies as an armed career criminal in light of *Johnson* and *Stitt* [Doc. 65].

## **II. ANALYSIS**

### **1. TIMELINESS**

Section 2255(f) places a one-year period of limitation on all petitions for collateral relief under § 2255 which runs from the latest of: (1) the date on which the judgment of conviction becomes final; (2) the date on which the impediment to making a motion created by governmental action in violation of the Constitution or laws of the United States is removed, if the movant was

prevented from making a motion by such governmental action; (3) the date on which the right asserted was initially recognized by the Supreme Court, if that right has been newly recognized by the Supreme Court and made retroactively applicable to cases on collateral review; or, (4) the date on which the facts supporting the claim or claims presented could have been discovered through the exercise of due diligence. 28 U.S.C. § 2255(f).

Claims based on the Supreme Court’s opinion in *Johnson* satisfy the third sub-category – the assertion of a newly recognized right made retroactively applicable to cases on collateral review. *Welch v. United States*, 136 S. Ct. at 1268 (*Johnson* constitutes a new substantive rule of constitutional law made retroactively applicable on collateral review); *In Re Watkins*, 810 F.3d at 381-85. The one-year limitation period for filing a motion to vacate based on a right newly recognized by the Supreme Court runs from the date on which the Supreme Court initially recognized the right asserted, not from the date on which the right asserted was made retroactively applicable. *Dodd v. United States*, 545 U.S. 353, 357 (2005). Accordingly, *Johnson* triggered a renewed one-year period of limitation beginning on the date of that decision, June 26, 2015, and running until June 26, 2016.

In this case, petitioner filed his amended § 2255 motion raising a *Johnson* claim on June 6, 2016, which falls safely within the one-year window for requesting collateral relief under *Johnson*.

## **2. STANDARD OF REVIEW**

To obtain relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2255, a petitioner must demonstrate “(1) an error of constitutional magnitude; (2) a sentence imposed outside the statutory limits; or (3) an error of fact or law . . . so fundamental as to render the entire proceeding invalid.” *McPearson v. United States*, 675 F.3d 553, 558-59 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2012) (quoting *Mallett v. United States*, 334 F.3d 491, 496–97 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003)). He “must clear a significantly higher hurdle than would exist on direct appeal”

and establish a “fundamental defect in the proceedings which necessarily results in a complete miscarriage of justice or an egregious error violative of due process.” *Fair v. United States*, 157 F.3d 427, 430 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1998).

### **3. PETITIONER’S JOHNSON CLAIM**

A felon who possesses a firearm normally faces a maximum penalty of 10 years’ imprisonment, 18 U.S.C. § 924(a)(2), and 3 years’ supervised release, 18 U.S.C. §§ 3559(a)(3) and 3583(b)(2). However, if that felon possesses the firearm after having sustained three prior convictions “for a violent felony or serious drug offense, or both,” the ACCA requires a 15 year minimum sentence, 18 U.S.C. § 924(e)(1), and increases the maximum supervised release term to 5 years, 18 U.S.C. §§ 3559(a)(1) and 3583(b)(1). The ACCA defines a “violent felony” as “any crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year” that: (1) “has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person of another” (the “use-of-physical-force clause”); (2) “is burglary, arson, or extortion, involves use of explosives” (the “enumerated-offense clause”); or, (3) “otherwise involves conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another” (the “residual clause”). 18 U.S.C. § 924(e)(2)(B).

In *Johnson*, the Supreme Court determined that the residual clause of the ACCA is unconstitutionally vague and concluded “that imposing an increased sentence under the residual clause … violates the Constitution’s guarantee of due process.” 135 S. Ct. at 2563. *Johnson* did not automatically invalidate all ACCA sentences, however, emphasizing that its holding “d[id] not call into question application of the Act to the four enumerated offenses, or the remainder of the Act’s definition of a violent felony.” *Id.*; *see also United States v. Kemmerling*, 612 F. App’x 373, 376 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2015) (explicitly finding that *Johnson* did not affect the ACCA’s use-of-physical-force clause). Thus, under *Johnson*, an ACCA sentence only raises due process concerns—and

thus is invalid—if it necessarily was based on predicate violent felonies that qualified as such only under the ACCA’s residual clause.

In this case, all three of petitioner’s predicate offenses were convictions for aggravated burglary in violation of Tenn. Code. Ann. § 39-14-403 [PSR ¶ 76, 77, 78]. Petitioner contends, *inter alia*, that aggravated burglary could qualify as a predicate offense only under the stricken residual clause of the ACCA. In response, the government initially cited then-binding Sixth Circuit precedent holding that a conviction for aggravated burglary under the Tennessee statute qualifies as an ACCA predicate under the enumerated-offense clause. *United States v. Nance*, 481 F.3d 882, 888 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2007).

However, in the *en banc Stitt* decision, the Sixth Circuit overruled *Nance* and expressly held that aggravated burglary is not a violent felony for purposes of the ACCA. 860 F.3d at 860-61. Applying a categorical approach, the Court determined that the Tennessee aggravated burglary statute “sweeps more broadly than generic burglary” and thus cannot qualify as a violent felony under the enumerated-offense clause. *Id.* at 861. Because the statute categorically is not a violent felony, and also is indivisible, the Sixth Circuit concluded that a conviction under the Tennessee aggravated burglary statute does not count as a violent felony under the ACCA. *Id.* at 862.

Because a conviction for aggravated burglary does not qualify as a violent felony under the first two clauses of § 924(e)(2)(B),<sup>4</sup> and *Johnson* invalidated the residual clause, petitioner’s aggravated burglary convictions under the Tennessee statute can no longer be used as predicate offenses under the ACCA. Furthermore, absent those convictions, petitioner no longer has the

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<sup>4</sup> The parties acknowledge that aggravated burglary does not have as an element the use, attempted use or threatened use of force and therefore cannot qualify as a violent felony under the “use-of-physical-force” clause of the ACCA [Doc. 65 p. 2].

requisite three prior convictions of a violent felony or a serious drug offense necessary to subject him to the ACCA's enhanced penalties.

Accordingly, the *Johnson* and *Stitt* decisions dictate that petitioner no longer can be designated an armed career criminal under § 924(e). As a result, the 180-month term of imprisonment and 5-year term of supervised release imposed by the Court at Count One of the superseding indictment exceed the maximum authorized sentence of not more than 10 years' imprisonment and not more than 3 years' supervised release for a non-ACCA offender convicted of a violation of § 922(g)(1). *See* 18 U.S.C. § 924(a)(2) and 18 U.S.C. §§ 3559(a)(3) and 3583(b)(2). Under these circumstances, the Court finds a clear entitlement to § 2255 relief, as petitioner has been subjected to "a sentence imposed outside the statutory limits." *McPhearson*, 675 F.3d at 559.

Where a § 2255 claim has merit, a district court "shall vacate and set the judgment aside" and, "as may appear appropriate," shall either "discharge the prisoner or resentence him or grant a new trial or correct the sentence." 28 U.S.C. § 2255(b); *see also Ajan v. United States*, 731 F.3d 629, 633 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2013). In this case, petitioner already has served his entire custodial sentence and has been released from prison. As a result, the parties are in agreement that the only appropriate relief in this case is to reduce the previously imposed supervised release term of five years on Count One of the superseding indictment to a three-year term on that count, the statutory maximum authorized for a non-ACCA offender convicted under 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1). Accordingly, the Court will grant petitioner relief in the form of a corrected sentence to that effect and will enter an order accordingly.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

For the reasons set forth herein, the Court finds that petitioner is entitled to relief under § 2255 and will grant petitioner's amended § 2255 motion [Doc. 55]. The Judgment imposed on March 30, 2005 [Doc. 40], will be amended to reflect a term of supervised release of 3 years on Count One of the superseding indictment, to run concurrently with the 3-year term previously imposed on Count Four of the superseding indictment, with the same standard and special conditions of supervision as previously ordered.

**ORDER ACCORDINGLY.**

s/ Thomas W. Phillips  
SENIOR UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE